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ABSTRACT

The challenge facing the speech communication profession is finding appropriate assessment procedures that are acceptable to administrators of state testing programs. The first option is simply to do nothing. A second alternative is standardized assessment. Speech communication professionals prefer a third testing procedure, performance-based evaluation. A fourth option emphasizes the importance of speech communication instruction and provides a viable, if not standardized, assessment method. This method would incorporate assessment of speaking and listening skills as part of a required course in the fundamentals of oral communication. The task for speech communication specialists is simply to continue their efforts to make a "Fundamentals of Oral Communication" course required in all higher education institutions. When students have the opportunity to take one or more courses in speaking and listening, competency in these skills can be assessed as part of the classroom activities. The issue of speech communication assessment is traced for the state of Florida. (Fifteen endnotes are attached.) (MG)

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WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

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SPEAKING AND LISTENING SKILLS ASSESSMENT: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The place of speech communication as a discipline in American Education has never been universally understood, appreciated or accepted. Since the early years of the twentieth century, speech teachers have engaged in a constant battle for recognition and acceptance of their courses, their research and their general academic credibility. From time to time small victories have been won. In 1979, the Florida Legislature enacted legislation requiring the identification of essential academic skills of college students. Two years later, the Florida State Board of Education adopted as essential communication skills reading, writing, listening and speaking. This act by Florida's highest educational body seemed to assure the place of speaking and listening in the state's plan to improve educational quality and academic standards. Although the majority of Florida's Community Colleges now require a course where speaking and listening skills are taught, little progress has been made since 1981 to bring the teaching of these skills to Florida university students. Even less has been done to assess student competence in these areas as mandated by the Florida Legislature. The purpose of this paper is to examine the assessment issue and recommend a course of action that is logical, cost-effective and designed to meet the educational needs of students.

What is the current status?

The issue for speech communication professionals in the majority of states is not how to respond to the states' assessment procedures. The real challenge facing our profession is finding appropriate assessment procedures that are acceptable to administrators of state testing programs.

Four courses of action merit consideration. The first and most widespread option currently being followed is simply to do nothing. Florida's Department of Education has shown little interest in assessing speaking and listening skills since the College Level Academic Skills Project (CLASP) program began. The official position of the Florida Department of Education is represented in a letter from the current Commissioner of Education, Betty Castor, to the CLASP Task Force Chairperson: "Speaking and listening skills ... are important, they should

be taught, and they have been adopted by the State Board of Education. However, . . . the State cannot undertake a wide-scale assessment of speaking and listening skills. The costs and practical problems associated with this are simply too great."¹

A second alternative is the most common testing method where standardized assessment procedures are in use. Multiple choice tests such as ACT, SAT, GRE, and GMAT are popular because of their reliability, economy and administrative efficiency. The 1986-87 CLAST examination used 35 multiple choice items to assess the writing skills of word choice, sentence structure, grammar, spelling, capitalization and punctuation. Thirty-six test items measured literal and critical comprehension in reading.²

Speech communication professionals overwhelmingly prefer a third testing procedure, performance-based evaluation. This procedure has always been an important assessment method in schools of medicine and dentistry. The moot court simulation in Law Schools is another important performance-based technique. The U.S. Army first used performance-based testing of army recruits in World War I. "The Army Beta intelligence tests were constructed for the testing of illiterate recruits, a device that foreshadowed the appearance of a wide array of nonverbal and manual tests. To assign personnel to such duties as cooking, baking, and mechanical maintenance, the army developed a series of oral trade tests, these representing in all likelihood the first mass use of performance like tests for purposes of certifying occupational fitness."³

The Communication Competency Assessment Instrument (CCAI)⁴ is a performance-based procedure for assessing speaking and listening skills that combines a student presentation of a persuasive speech, viewing a videotaped lecture and a dyadic interview with the test administrator.

A fourth option emphasizes the importance of speech communication instruction and provides a viable, if not standardized, assessment method. This method would incorporate assessment of speaking and listening skills as part of a required course in the Fundamentals of Oral Communication. This alternative was endorsed by the participants at the 1988 SCA-sponsored Flagstaff Conference on Speech Communication Education.

What is the desired status?

The answer to the question, "What is the desired status for student assessment?" will differ depending upon who responds to the question. Most state Department of Education administrators prefer no statewide assessment for economic and administrative reasons. The state of Florida will spend almost \$1,000,000 in 1989 to test 80,000 students in its CLASP testing program. According to a 1987 report from the American Association for Higher Education, only ten states have testing programs in place or anticipate the implementation of such programs.⁵

A 1989 census of State Departments of Education found only two states, California and Florida, conduct any type of statewide assessment of speaking and listening skills of post-secondary students. California has developed a battery of placement tests for ESL students who are enrolled in community colleges. The test objective is to place students in "homogeneous class groups. Students are able to benefit most from instruction when it is geared to a certain level of language ability."⁶ These tests include guidelines for testing listening, speaking and writing skills.

In October 1989, Florida began statewide testing of applicants for an initial regular Florida teacher certificate. Prospective teachers must pass the Initial Teacher Subject Area Test (ITSAT). This test includes a two-part Speech examination; a multiple-choice content examination and a five-minute videotaped oral presentation.⁷

The most common explanation for not implementing statewide assessment programs continues to be the absence of standardized testing procedures with demonstrated validity and reliability. In 1982, the Florida Department of Education announced the first College-Level Academic Skills Test (CLAST). Although the initial test omitted speaking and listening skills assessment, the Department of Education reported that "work is underway to identify feasible alternatives for the assessment of student achievement of listening and speaking skills. While there are some measurement problems involved in the statewide assessment of

listening and speaking, it is anticipated that a developmental form of testing those skills will be initiated during the academic year of 1983-84."⁸

Seven years after the Department of Education's optimistic prediction, speaking and listening skills remain untested on Florida's tri-annual CLAST examination. Speech communication professionals must bear part of the responsibility for the absence of an easily-administered paper and pencil test of speaking and listening skills. From the earliest efforts to develop a test of speaking and listening skills, Florida speech communication educators avoided the multiple-choice test format in favor of a procedure that required the preparation and delivery of a persuasive or informative speech. The cost of such a procedure would be prohibitive. For example, if a university of moderate size tested its 1300 sophomore students using Rubin's CCAI instrument, it would take a person with the appropriate professional credentials 664 hours or 16 weeks working 40 hours a week to do nothing but administer the test. This figure does not include time for post test evaluation and administration.⁹

A performance-based instrument to test speaking and listening is a possible, if expensive procedure. The current CLAST examination includes an essay as part of the test of writing skills. Two essay topics are provided. Examinees select one topic and are allowed 50 minutes to complete their essay. These essays are graded using a 4-point holistic evaluation procedure.¹⁰ This procedure has been adapted for use in assessing speaking skills.¹¹ The project, funded by the Florida Department of Education, revealed that while holistic evaluation of speaking may be useful for peer evaluation, institutional assessment or as an entry-level placement measure, the holistic evaluation of student speeches is impractical for statewide testing programs such as the Florida College-Level Academic Skills Project.¹²

What changes can be implemented?

Professional and popular literature proclaim the importance of speaking and listening skills for business success, interpersonal relationships, family togetherness, and the other diverse contexts for human interaction. These statements of praise, however, represent little

more than "lip service" to the value of effective communication. Specific changes must be made in the minds of this nation's educators before communication training can take its place with the other essential academic skills which all students should acquire as part of their formal education. Policy changes are needed to bring speaking and listening to the level of recognized importance given to reading and writing. Although educators are quick to acknowledge the importance of speaking and listening skills, courses designed to teach these skills are not available in many high schools and are not required in most colleges and universities. Only one of Florida's nine state universities requires a course in the Fundamentals of Oral Communication of all of its students. A 1988 survey of state universities in Florida estimated that less than 27% of the first time in college students who begin their post secondary education at a state university in Florida take a course in which the acquisition of speaking and listening skills are principal course objectives.¹³

The task for Speech Communication specialists is simply to continue their efforts to make a "Fundamentals of Oral Communication" course required in community colleges, four-year schools and universities just as those institutions require students to take English and mathematics courses where reading, writing and computation skills are taught.

When students have the opportunity to take one or more courses in speaking and listening, competency in these skills can be assessed as part of the classroom activities. This preference for local assessment is supported by Florida Commissioner of Education Castor who has asserted that speaking and listening skills "can best be taught and monitored by individual teachers in each institution."¹⁴

The challenge for the future, according to American Association for Higher Education Report on Assessment, will be the "good faith with which faculty and institutional leaders respond to the many statewide and local initiatives already in place."¹⁵ Speech Communication specialists must meet this challenge with continued professional pressure to make speaking and listening a required part of the post secondary education curriculum.

ENDNOTES

1. Letter from Betty Castor, Florida Commissioner of Education, May 4, 1987.
2. 1986-87 CLAST Technical Report. (Tallahassee: Florida Department of Education), p. 12.
3. J. E. Spirer, "Performance Testing: Issues Facing Vocational Education. (Columbus: The National Center for Research in Vocational Education, The Ohio State University. Research and Development Series No. 190), p. vii.
4. See Rebecca E. Rubin, "Assessing Speaking and Listening Competence of the College Level: The Communication Competency Assessment Instrument," *Communication Education*, 31 (1982), 19-32.
5. C. M. Boyer, P. T. Ewell, J. E. Finney, J. R. Mingle, "Assessment and Outcomes Measurement--A View from the States," *AAHE Bulletin*, March, 1987, p. 3.
6. ESL Placement Tests for Community Colleges: A Users Guide (Preliminary Draft). Prepared by the Testing Subcommittee of the ESL Advisory Committee. California Community Colleges Report No. 875, p. 3.
7. FTCE-R Test Administration Manual for Subject Area Tests with Unique Requirements 1989-1990: SPEECH. Institute for Instructional Research and Practice, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL.
8. "A Report on the Development of the College-Level Academic Skills Test." (Tallahassee: Florida Department of Education, August 15, 1982).
9. K. P. Taylor, "The Florida Speaking and Listening Test: The Promise and the Reality," *Florida Speech Communication Journal*. Vol. 12, No. 2, 1984, p. 34.
10. 1986-87 CLAST Technical Report, pp. 12-13.
11. K. P. Taylor, "Holistic Evaluation of Speaking Skills," paper presented at the 1987 Convention of the Speech Communication Association, Boston, November, 1987.

12. Taylor, "Holistic Evaluation," p. 4.

13. Only five of Florida's SUS institutions have significant numbers of first time in college students. This survey compared each of the five universities' FTIC enrollment for 1986-87 with the number of students taught in a basic speech class where speaking and listening skills were emphasized. For the 1986-87 academic year, 12,921 first time in college students enrolled at Florida A & M University, Florida State University, the University of Central Florida, University of Florida and the University of South Florida. During the Fall and Spring semesters of that year, those institutions taught 3,400 students in performance-oriented speech classes. This figure represents 26.3% of those institutions' FTIC students. The University of Central Florida is the only one of the SUS universities that requires a speech communication course of its students. In 1986-87, UCF taught 1287 students in SPC 1014. This figure represents 99.8% of its FTIC student population. When the number of students taught at UCF is omitted from the total students taught by the other four SUS universities, only 18.2% of the FTIC students at those schools received speaking and listening instruction during 1986-87.

14. Castor letter.

15. Boyer, p. 5.